



MSU DROUGHT GUIDE REVISED 1992

Dealing With Drought on Range

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Drought is a serious obstacle to successful range livestock management. Producers must understand how drought affects plants, grazing animals, livestock management and what options exist.

Forage production is decreased dramatically. But, reductions are less on ranges in good and excellent ecological condition.

Ability of perennial plants to recover after drought is closely related to their vigor before the drought and during the drought. Excessive grazing (more than 60 percent of current year's growth) decreases some plants' ability to recover. Moderate use (25 to 55 percent) does not seem to affect the recovery rate.

Livestock numbers must be reduced according to forage supply. Yearlings should be marketed early while calves should be weaned early and fed at home, at another feedlot or sold. Cull low-producing cows.

Spread grazing load uniformly within a pasture. A plant will not be able to regrow if grazed repeatedly. Rotate livestock to fresh pastures if they are available.

Supplement low-quality feed. Feed supplements can often be used to correct low forage quality. However, feed supplements are usually not an economical substitute for range forage.

Try not to buy, or put up, weed-infested hay. The future cost of feeding weed-infested hay far outweighs its feed value in the short-run. If

weedy hay must be fed -- feed in an area or holding pasture that is removed from streams, riparian and wooded areas. Be sure to keep your stock confined for several days after feeding the bad hay to prevent them from spreading viable seed through their digestive tract. Observe holding pastures and feeding areas closely and treat infestations.

Try to take advantage of areas dominated with annual species. They should be grazed early in the season when their nutrient value is high and to allow grazing deferment on the higher condition range dominated with perennial plants.

Graze crested wheatgrass early and longer than normal. It is one of our plants that is most tolerant of grazing.

Keep cattle on subirrigated sites longer than usual. Fertilizer could be used to increase forage production on many of these sites. However, fertilizer is a cash cost and soils should be tested before fertilizer is applied.

If irrigation water is less than usual, concentrate it on your best-producing hay meadows and graze the remainder.

Keep accurate cost data. Management decisions are easier to make if production costs during a drought year can be compared to the normal situation.

Do not restock until you are certain that your range has recovered.